

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

RAILS OF THE WORLD. By S. Dillon Ripley, illus. by J. Fenwick Lansdowne. Chapter on fossil species by Storrs L. Olson. David R. Godine, Boston, 1977:xx + 406 pp., 41 color plates, 35 black-and-white plates, 17 maps; size 10 × 14 in. \$75.00.—Dillon Ripley has been interested in rails since his earliest expeditions abroad many years ago, and has long wanted to write a monograph on the family. He was both inspired and challenged by Alfred Newton's remarks in the *Dictionary of Birds* (1893) that the rails are an enigmatic and little known family for which a monograph would prove rewarding and valuable. Ripley further explained his purpose in a meeting at the Peabody Museum in 1977, as quoted in *Discovery* 12(3):44 (1977), that he had become certain over the years "that if I ever could write a monograph on the rails, not only had one never been written before, but the likelihood was that one would never be written again, and that almost anything I managed to say about the rails was likely not to be very strongly corrected in the future, so that I had clear sailing by taking on a family that is as obscure, and little known, and enigmatic as the rails."

The result of Ripley's endeavors is a handsome monograph that certainly can take its place in the parade of fine bird books of recent years. This is a book in the grand manner; large, lavishly illustrated, and printed on fine paper with wide margins. It combines the attributes of a "coffee table" book that is a pleasure to browse through, and a utilitarian work of inestimable value to all who are interested in rails.

Fenwick Lansdowne is an accomplished artist whose rails here are generally successful and attractive, though a few have the wrong shape or pose. The Spot-flanked Gallinule is drawn to look like a gallinule, which it is, but in the field it looks like an oversized *Porzana*, and its bill is much brighter than pictured here. One irritating thing about the paintings is that the birds are not drawn to scale. On the first plate, for instance, the giant bird in the middle of the picture is *Eulabaeornis castaneoventris*, length 11 in., while the small one crouching at the top left corner is *Himantornis*, a hefty 17-inch bird. There are many other examples of this lack of scaling. The grouping is sometimes curious. Two *Canirallus* are on Plate 2 with Wallace's Rail, while the third is on Plate 3; why not put all 3 together? Perhaps the artist did the plates before the taxonomist started playing around with the genera. Another irritation is that while the text is keyed to the plates, the reverse is not true. The plate captions should have contained page references to the species accounts. Despite these annoyances the plates are a fine addition to the book and make a large contribution to its success.

The book is divided into an introduction and 5 parts. In the introduction Ripley gives a history of the discovery of rails, written with a charming antiquarian flavor, and describes his own early involvement with the family. His pleasant writing style makes for easy reading.

The acknowledgments come at the end of the introduction. From the vague generalization that "in recent years Gorman Bond and Michel Deshayes have undertaken further to make this whole work possible for me," one would never guess that what these 2 really did was to research and write up much of the data for the present work. Ripley should give proper, specific credit where due.

Part 1, *The Characteristics of Rails*, has sections on anatomy, classification, locomotion, flight, nesting, voice, duetting, display, fighting, and various aspects of the relationships between rails and man, with a long section on hunting. In the classification on p. 5, only 3 of the 8 promised gruiform suborders are listed: the other 5 were somehow left out.

The section on classification deserves some comment, mainly because of Ripley's radical revision of rail genera. His classification can be compared to those of previous authors as follows:

	<i>Genera</i>	<i>Species</i>
Sharpe (1894), <i>Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum</i> , vol. 23.	50	165
Peters (1934), <i>Check-List of Birds of the World</i> , vol. 2.	52	138
Berndt & Meise (1960), <i>Naturgeschichte der Vogel</i> , vol. 2.	51	138
Fisher & Peterson (1964), <i>The World of Birds</i> .	51	130
Olson (1973), <i>A Classification of the Rallidae</i> , Wilson Bull. 85:381-416	35	?
Ripley (1977), <i>Rails of the World</i> .	18	129

It can be seen that while Ripley has made few changes at the species level, the carnage among the genera has been great. While few would deny that the time had come to do away with many of the old monotypic genera, one wonders whether such wholesale slaughter is really justified. There is no doubt in Ripley's mind that it is, for he says (p. 6) "I find few of the reasons advanced for maintaining additional genera compelling or cogent. A single question . . . seems to me open to arguments of taxonomic taste or discretion." In other words there is only one correct treatment—his own. Attention, rail taxonomists! The final word has now been spoken. You should be looking for work in other fields. Ripley continues: "For the rest, the preservation of so many genera of rails up until now has been a question of waiting for monographers to address themselves to this neglected family." This is true, but the reader should not get the impression that Ripley was the pioneer monographer who made the break with tradition. That pioneer was Storrs Olson, who reduced the number of genera to 35. Incredibly, Olson's classification is not even mentioned in the list of previous classifications on p. 6. Here is another instance of proper credit not being given.

In part 3, *Evolution and Speciation*, Ripley gives his reasons for merging various genera. Arguments will probably continue forever as to what constitutes a valid generic character, and every taxonomist is entitled to his own opinion, the only requirement being that he be consistent in his use of characters. The same character must not be used for 2 opposing functions. While many of Ripley's generic limits seem reasonable, he is sometimes guilty of this no-no. Thus, plumage similarities are the basis for merging *Neocrex* in *Porzana* and *Aramides* in *Eulabaeornis*, while plumage dissimilarities are ignored in uniting the African genus *Sarothrura* with the totally dissimilar New World genera *Coturnicops* and *Micropygia*. This arrangement is in any case geographic nonsense; and no-one who has ever heard the voices of both the Yellow Rail and *Sarothrura* spp. would ever dream of putting them in the same genus.

Part 2, *The Distribution of Rails*, is the most successful of the introductory sections, concentrating on the causes of distribution and covering subjects like adaptation and dispersal. Among other topics Ripley discusses the reasons for the success of rails as colonizers, and shows how their reluctance to fly and their rapid evolution of flightlessness might paradoxically help rather than hinder colonization. This is a thought-provoking and well-written section.

Part 4, *The Species of Rails*, contains the species accounts. This is the real meat of the book and its most valuable contribution. It is prefaced by a key to the genera, while in the text the genera have species keys and the species have subspecies keys. Each *species* account contains a brief overall description of the bird, taxonomic comments, and

a discussion of habitat, voice, food, and breeding. Each *subspecies* account contains a detailed description, measurements, distribution, and status. There are only 17 maps, and these are reserved for polytypic species with the most complex distributions. The maps are well-drawn, clear, and easy to read. There is a tremendous amount of information here, and the researchers evidently did a good job with the literature since the text is freely littered with citations. While excellent as regards "museum" type information (description, measurements, subspecific characters, distribution, etc.), the text would have benefitted from more first-hand field experience of the writers. Lacking this an attempt should have been made to contact other workers in the field and obtain unpublished information from them. In the account of *Rallina tricolor*, for example, out of nearly 2 full pages of text there are just 3 lines on life history as follows: "From the little that is known of its life history it appears to share the ralline habits of secrecy and stealth, damp habitat, and crepuscular calling and feeding preferences." You could make this same statement about most of the rails of the world and get away with it. Yet there is specific information about the bird. In 1974 Mrs. H. B. Gill, a well-known Australian amateur ornithologist, took me to see a pair of *Rallina tricolor* inhabiting a stream near her house. I taped the calls and played them back, which brought the birds into view. But I was not witnessing something new to science. Mrs. Gill had kept the birds under observation for some time and had already shown them to a number of visitors. Here was a paragraph of information on the species just waiting to be tapped. Also, there are only 2 lines on status in the entire account: "By no means rare in Queensland (E. P. Ramsay in Mathews, 1911)." Surely more is known about its status than a single remark in a book written 66 years earlier. Again, the status of *Canirallus k. kioloides* is given as "Especially common on the narrow coastal plain at Maroantsetra (Rand, 1936)." That may have been true in Rand's day, but today most of the vegetation there has been cut down and does not harbor *Canirallus*, as Ripley could have discovered by checking with recent workers in Madagascar. Rouget's Rail, *Rougetius rougetii* is said to "keep hidden in thick vegetation during the day," and appear at dusk and dawn, another safe statement about almost any rail, but this one is a maverick and comes boldly into the open far from cover during daylight hours. I have sat in my car on the main highway north of Addis Ababa and watched *Rougetius* feeding on bare mud by a small pond, scarcely blinking as trucks and buses hurried by. The above instances only indicate a certain lack of field experience with the birds concerned and a lack of depth in research, and should not obscure the overall value of the information presented.

While the species accounts fulfill their function of drawing together information from every source, there is also new information of interest. Ripley has stuck his neck out and lumped King and Clapper rails, a treatment that will annoy many while pleasing others, but Ripley has bolstered his case with a lot of data, including personal communications, and has produced a reasonable argument. Again, there is a lot of information on the Galapagos Rail, *Laterallus spilonotus*, derived to a great extent, it would seem, from an unpublished MS by Alan Franklin and Deborah and David Clark, who studied the bird in the field. Strangely, there are no taxonomic comments on this bird, which has hitherto been considered a subspecies of the Black Rail, *Laterallus jamaicensis*. While this separation may well be justified, I think we are owed an explanation.

Part 5, *A Synopsis of the Fossil Rallidae* by Storrs L. Olson, is worthy of high praise. It is much more than a simple catalog. Each species is written up under the following headings: Holotype, Horizon, Locality, Material, Illustrations, and Remarks, the latter often containing considerable discussion. The chapter is copiously illustrated with

photographs and drawings of bones. This is a most valuable contribution by one of the world's leading authorities on the subject.

In conclusion, despite many faults this is a worthwhile and valuable publication. To have put all the rails of the world between two covers, complete with illustrations, is a praiseworthy achievement in itself. The price is steep but not out of line with today's incredible book prices, nor unreasonable considering the quality of production and number of illustrations. For all who can afford it, I can certainly recommend the book.—STUART KEITH.

Wilson Bull., 90(2), 1978, pp. 325–327

THE AUDUBON SOCIETY FIELD GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS. EASTERN REGION. By John Bull and John Farrand, Jr., Alfred A. Knopf, produced by Chanticleer Press, New York, 1977:775 pp., 584 color photos. \$7.95.—A bird guide that tops the *New York Times Book Review* best seller list for paperbacks (which it is not) for several weeks, and which remains on that list for several months deserves more than passing mention. The dust jacket claims the book to be “a revolutionary field guide. Unique on four counts.” The supposed novel ideas are to illustrate the various species with color photographs rather than paintings, a “visual organization” of these photographs by color and shape, and a text arranged by habitat. None of these ideas is really new. The argument as to whether a photograph or a painting is the best means to present a typical representation of a bird is an old one (see a review by R. Mengel, *Auk* 72: 308–310, 1955), and in this case our authors, both connected with the American Museum of Natural History, come out wholeheartedly for photographs, “every artist rendering of a bird is his interpretation whereas a good photograph captures the natural color and stance of birds as you usually see them” (p. 12). The operative word is, of course, “good.”

The extent of the participation of the Audubon Society (National) in the preparation of the book is nowhere made clear, although Susan Rayfield of the staff of *Audubon* is listed as “Project Editor” and is given credit for the development of the “Visual Key.” I understand that it was she who performed the herculean task of rounding up the photographs used. In some ways this guide shows signs of lineal descent from the “Audubon Guides” written by Dick Pough a generation ago. Much the same geographical range is covered (everything east of the Rocky Mountains), and the present work attempts as did Pough to provide information beyond simple identification matters.

There are 584 color photographs covering 456 species. Most species are represented by spring males only, but 122 species have a second illustration, usually of a female or of another plumage. Twenty-six species are described but not included in the photographs, although a very small drawing of these species accompanies the text.

The photographs are clumped in the first half of the book, arranged in groups of similar shape, with small silhouettes serving as location guides. The passerines are arranged by color. The 2 photographs of dimorphic species are thus often widely separated. Arrangement by color also meant that some arbitrary decisions had to be made as to under what color to include a given species. These decisions were sometimes rather unwise, as for example the predominately gray and yellow Western Kingbird is listed under green birds. The text accounts of the species are arranged under 12 categories of habitat. Here again arbitrary and not always fortunate decisions had to be made. The Great Horned Owl, which must nest in almost any habitat, is listed under “Coniferous Forest,” the Red-headed Woodpecker is listed under “Grasslands” and inland birders